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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of one's competence and control in a task are related to one's confidence in doing a task and attitude towards it. In teaching, it is assumed to be very important that teachers view themselves as competent in and in control of their teaching tasks. To investigate trainees' perceptions of control and competence, a short questionnaire was given to two tutorial groups of teacher trainees in the Certificate of Education programme for training primary school teachers. They were asked before going out to practice teaching whether they could teach well and to explain their perceptions of two teaching outcomes. After seven weeks of experience and practice in the schools, the same trainees were asked to give their perceptions of competence and control in their teaching performance. Comparisons of their perceptions before and after teaching practice indicate the consistencies of causal attributions in teaching. Findings of this study provide insights to teacher educators and to the developers of teacher training programmes. (Author/JD)

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Paper

by

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# Trainees' Perceptions of Competence and Control in Teaching

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Perceptions of one's competence and control in a task are related to one's confidence in doing a task and the attitude towards it. In teaching, it is assumed to be very important that teachers view themselves as competent in and in control of their teaching tasks. To investigate trainees' perception of control and competence, two tutorial groups of teacher trainees in the Certificate of Education were asked before going out to practise teaching whether they could teach well and give explanation for their perceptions to two teaching outcomes. After seven weeks of experience and practice in the schools, the same trainees were asked to give their perceptions of competence and control in their teaching performance. Comparisons of their perceptions before and after Teaching Practice indicate the consistencies of causal attributions in teaching. Findings of this study provide insights to teacher educators and the developers of teacher training programmes.

To be happy and confident in teaching, the teachers have to perceive themselves as in control of the teaching environment, and as competent at the teaching task. Teachers who see themselves teaching subjects which they have a good knowledge in, a good understanding of the teaching strategies, and an ability to get along with pupils are happy, confident and competent in their work. Contrarily, teachers who complain, without doing something, that children are naughty, classrooms are crowded, or that there is too much marking and preparation do not see themselves as in control. In fact they are being controlled by their pupils, the environment and the subjects they teach.

People who believe that their success at a task is due to their capability and skill are happy and proud of their performance and expect similar result in the future. Those who attribute their failure to lack of effort will expend more effort to achieve future success. They will stay on the task and try their best even in the face of difficulties and frustration. Perceptions of causes for doing well or doing poorly in a task (causal attributions) are said to have an immense effect on subsequent feelings, behaviours, expectancies and future performance (Arkin & Maruyama, 1979; Ames, 1978; Weiner, Heckhausen, Meyer, & Cook, 1972).

Most studies on perceptions of control and competence focus mainly on the learning of children, adolescents, college students on tasks like anagrams (Elig & Frieze, 1979; Nicholls, 1975; Tennen & Eller, 1977), paper-and-pencil tests (Arkin & Maruyama, 1979; Crandall, Katkovsky & Crandall, 1965; Russell, 1982; Ryckman & Peckham, 1987), and in imagined or induced experimental conditions to reach at success or failure outcomes (Andrews and Debus, 1978; Nicholls, 1975; Ryckman & Peckham, 1987). This study (part of a bigger project) attempts to examine the perceptions of teacher trainees about their teaching performance, a more realistic situation for teachers than an induced performance in an experimental task.

The use of free response or verbal report data to investigate trainees' causal perceptions in teaching performance should yield valuable information which will not only enhance our understanding of the cognitive and motivational operations of trainees' perceptions of their teaching, but also the underlying reasons for their teaching performance. Findings from this study lends insight to teacher educators, school principals and school policy makers in terms of teaching subjects, advice and feedback of teaching, as well as curriculum for teacher education.

This paper hopes to answer the following questions.

1. How do our trainees perceive their performance in teaching?

2. What causal perceptions do trainees make for good and poor teaching?

3. How different are the perceptions of those who perform well in teaching practice compared with those who perform less well?

4. How are the perceptions of competence and control affected by their teaching practice?

## Method

Two tutorial groups of trainees (N = 28 + 25) from the 1989 intake of Certificate of Education (a programme for the training of primary school teachers) were asked before they went out for their first teaching practice (TP) whether or not they would teach well. They were to provide written responses as well as reasons for two performance outcomes: (a) if they teach well, and (b) if they teach poorly. The trainees' responses were coded and tabulated for analysis. After seven weeks in the school (two weeks of school experience and five weeks of teaching practice), trainees were asked whether they thought they had taught well, and what was the reason for their perceived performance.

Trainees are considered as having confidence if they believe that they will teach well even before they actually teach. They are viewed as having perception of control if they attribute their performance to effort and will to try. The trainees who believe that it is their ability, knowledge or skill that makes a difference in the outcome of their teaching perceive themselves as having competence. Trainees whose causal perceptions such as interest and enthusiasm are said to have affective causal factors, and those who attribute their performance to uncontrollable causes give health, pupils and luck as reasons for their teaching outcome.

The Term I Teaching Practice grades, awarded after 10 weeks of teaching practice, were used to distinguish trainees who had taught well from those who had not. No one in the sample failed in this teaching practice. Therefore, even those who were in the low performance group and were supposed to have done poorly in the their teaching practice also passed their Teaching Practice (TP).

The teaching grades of the sampled trainees range from A- to C-. After grouping into three groups, 19 were found to be in the high performance group (3 A-, 4 B+ and 12 B), 19 were in the low performance group (11 C+, 6 C and 2 C-) leaving 15 in the medium group (15 B-) which was not used in the comparisons of pre and post TP causal perceptions.

## Results and Discussion

### Perceptions of Performance in Teaching

The trainees, on the whole, appeared to be confident. A great majority (48 out of 52, or 92.3 percent; one was absent in class on the day of data collection) believe that they would teach well even before they go out to school practice. Only

four (7.7 percent) said that they would not. However, neither all the 48 did well (in the high performance group), nor all the four did poorly (in the low performance group) as rated in their Term I Teaching Practice. Two who thought they would not teach well did well and all, except one, did poorly said they would teach well.

After seven weeks of school experience and practice, 35 trainees were contacted. Minor changes were noted in their perceptions of performance. Some (n = 5) lost confidence and felt they had taught poorly, and a few (n = 3) gained confidence and thought they had taught well. One had not gained confidence after seven weeks in the school, and another had confidence in her planning but not in classroom management, hence was unsure about her teaching performance. Twenty-four (68.5 percent) remained confident as before and together with the one who was absent earlier claimed to have taught well.

Results of this kind is as expected. Some find (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984; Zeichner, 1980) student teaching experience as providing complementary effects upon teacher development but others think it plays little part in altering the perspectives trainees bring with them. However, the impact of teaching practice can be positive or negative depending on the experience one has with the school, principal, teachers especially the cooperating teacher(s) and the pupils.

Causal Perceptions for Good and Poor Teaching

Other than seeing themselves as competent and in control, the trainees also provide reasons such as liking a subject, enjoying teaching, and being interested in imparting knowledge for both teaching well and vice versa for teaching poorly. More than two thirds or 70 percent of the 52 trainees attribute their teaching performance to this kind of affective reasons (see Table 1). External factors are also cited, for example, "children are

Table 1

Distribution of Causal Perceptions (%) of TP Performance

| TP performance | Factors | | | | $x^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Control | Competence | Affective | External | |
| Good | 38 | 23 | 33 | 6 | 23.92 |
| Poor | 21 | 31 | 37 | 11 | 15.68 |

Note: $x^2 = 12.84$, df = 3, p = .005

genuinely interested in learning" and "God will see me through" for teaching well, and "children do not understand the subject" and "environmental factor" for teaching poorly.

There is, however, a significant difference in trainees' causal perceptions when performance outcomes differ. More than one third of the trainees see themselves as in control (exerting effort, and preparing for class, etc.) when they teach well, but when they teach poorly, about the same proportion of the trainees attribute their performance to affective causes.

It is interesting to note that there is a clear discrepancy between the perceived control ascribed to good performance and that ascribed to poor performance. This may have been a self-serving bias when trainees make causal attributions for their teaching performance. Attributing success to a controllable factor such as effort results in pride and satisfaction and ascribing failure to an uncontrollable factor reduces guilt and shame (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978).

Pre TP Causal Perceptions of High vs. Low Performance Trainees

The responses of the 19 High Performance Trainees were compared with the 19 Low Performance Trainees (see Table 2). The high performers attributed their good teaching significantly more to controllable factor (effort) while they attributed to affective causes for teaching poorly (interest, enthusiasm in

Table 2

Distribution of Causal Perceptions (%) of Teaching Performance: High Performance Group cf. Low Performance Group

| TP performance | Factors | | | | $x^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Control | Competence | Affective | External | |
| High | | | | | |
| Good | 47 | 21 | 21 | 11 | 28.48 |
| Poor | 17 | 33 | 39 | 11 | 20.80 |
| Low | | | | | |
| Good | 16 | 32 | 47 | 5 | 40.56 |
| Poor | 21 | 26 | 42 | 11 | 20.08 |

Note: $x^2 = 12.84$, df = 3, p = .005

the subject or teaching). It is truly possible that trainees in the primary schools be asked to teach a subject which they do not like. And although they are competent in their own subjects, they have no control, at times, over what subjects they have to teach besides their own favored ones. Often trainees teaching a subject which they are not competent or teaching a class with behavioural problems get discouraged and lose confidence in their teaching.

On the other hand, the low performers cited more affective causes than other factors as reasons for their performance, be they good or poor teaching. This suggests that the low performers perceive themselves as less competent or in control in the teaching situation than the high performers. If teachers' perception of control and competence is synonymous with teachers' sense of efficacy, then trainees' causal perceptions is an important factor in the development of their profession, and later in school improvement. It is necessary that trainees should have a healthy and positive perception of their performance.

Pre and Post TP Perceptions of Competence and Control

The causal perceptions of teaching performance were compared between the pre and post School Experience/Practice. Results show that causal perceptions do change, especially those who believe that they had taught well when earlier they thought they would not. These trainees ascribed their good performance to competence before teaching practice, but as they increased their confidence they attributed to a controllable factor such as "I was quite well-prepared"; or "my rapport with students was good." This seems to suggest that perception of control (effort) better than perception of competence (ability, knowledge, etc.) will sustain the earlier confidence in teaching.

Similarly, those who thought they would teach well but felt that they had not taught well changed their causal perceptions, mostly from affective factors to competence or lack of it, e.g., I lack the knowledge in the subject, I am inexperienced, I am unable to discipline the class. These trainees would have been helped given a subject which they are knowledgeable and competent in teaching. A better managed class of pupils would not add on the incompetence they perceive in their teaching. With experience, these trainees would be more confident and perceive themselves as in control of the teaching situation.

Those trainees whose confidence was not affected by their experience in the school experience and practice changed their causal ascriptions also. They included several external and uncontrollable factors such as the "the students are keen to learn," or "the supervisor is encouraging" or "the cooperating teacher is helpful and offers good advice" etc. More high performers than low performers attributed to this external factors. This is probably so because their confidence has led them to be more appreciative of their pupils, cooperating teachers and supervisors.

## Summary and Conclusion

It is evident that most of the trainees are quite confident in their teaching performance. Only a few do not foresee that they can teach well. They anticipate problems such as the possibility of having difficulty to understand the behaviour of students, or a lack of good foundation or a dislike of the subject. These are valid reasons for their lack of confidence. Trainees sometimes are assigned to classes with some discipline problems or be given a subject which they are not quite competent in. Such experience can be discouraging if problems encountered are too serious to be resolved. Although a wide range of experience should be provided in their training, it would nevertheless be advisable to enable them direct their energy to cope with teaching a subject of their own choice to a well-disciplined class, and try out various teaching strategies in the beginning of their training. They could certainly be exposed to other experiences at a later time in their training.

A small number of trainees are found to have changed their level of confidence after having some experience in the school. Two thirds remain confident in their performance but their confidence does not truly reflect their performance. Some lost confidence even when their TP performance is good, and some gain confidence despite their low TP performance.

Generally causal attribution for good teaching performance is different from causal attribution for poor teaching performance. Causal perceptions are also found to be different between the High Performance trainees and Low Performance trainees. Perception patterns follow those suggest previously by researchers on causal attribution. Such patterns tend to have a self-serving bias, with an exception of a few.

Results from this study shed light on teacher education. They provide insights in terms of selection of preservice teachers, planning of the curriculum, and structure of experience in the teaching practice.

In the selection of preservice teachers, it would be better to ensure commitment of the recruits. For the committed ones are those who want to and feel responsible for making learning interesting and meaningful to their pupils. They will make teaching a success. They perceive themselves as in control of the teaching situation and will expend more effort in their work. They will also perceive themselves as competent as they have the will to learn in addition to their accumulated knowledge. They will persist even in the face of difficulty.

Since some trainees show concern about their knowledge in the subject and understanding of their pupils, a knowledge-based teacher education programmes could prepare beginning teachers more adequately and equip them with both the subject content as well as practical experience and professional knowledge of teaching. Such a knowledge-based teacher education programme

will build up the confidence of the trainees when they go out to teach and apply their knowledge at ease. Teachers and trainees alike, will develop feelings of inadequacy when they realize that they do not have the knowledge or skills to deal with the situation they face.

Teaching subjects which trainees are incompetent to teach may also lead beginning teachers lose interest and zeal in teaching. If trainees are given subjects in which they are knowledgeable and interested in teaching, they will feel competent and enthusiastic in imparting such knowledge. With the help and guidance of the cooperating teachers and supervisor, their confidence, competence in and control of the subject matter and the teaching situation will be assured. When faced with difficulty, these trainees will intensify effort, explore various ways to cope with the situation and still feel efficacious in their dealing with the unforseen, unpredictable and unexpected event that pop up unnecessarily.

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